

Taft students tour Washington, D.C.

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A group of Taft High School girls had a chance to get up close and personal with the federal government on a weeklong trip last month to Washington D.C.

The students, all sophomores, included, Justyna Koscielniak, Gina Lombardo, Yvette Dynia, Agnes Bartusiak, Beata Roszczewski and Aleksandra Blach.

They took off from O'Hare International Airport April 27 and returned the following Saturday. Taft teacher Geoff Carlson was their chaperone. Their trip was postponed this winter by the pending war with Iraq.

While in the nation's capital, the students followed a rigorous agenda set up by the Close Up Foundation, a nonpartisan organization that sponsors school groups from across the country. Close-Up's goal is to spark an interest in democracy and national policy by giving students a chance to get an insider's view of our nation's government at work.

The sophomores from Taft were joined by students for other Chicago area schools and others from as far away as Alaska and Nevada.

Activities included tours of the Capitol building and the White House. Students attended a point-counterpoint discussion featuring both U.S. senators from Illinois - Democrat Dick Durbin and Republican Peter Fitzgerald - and had a chance to interview an aide to U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, and a reporter who was embedded with soldiers in Iraq.

Durbin, re-elected in November, and Fitzgerald, who announced he would not run for a second term in 2004, answered questions of a wide variety of issues ranging from education to late-term abortions.

When asked about the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which allows the federal government to withhold funding to school districts that do not achieve specified performance goals, Durbin said he had his misgivings about it. Fitzgerald said he supports it.

Durbin referred to NCLB as another example of the federal government passing laws without providing the money to carry them out.

He said he is concerned about the possibility of teachers and teaching assistants losing their jobs because of new minimum qualification requirements. Fitzgerald took the position that the burden for education falls on the states anyway.

In regard to late-term abortions, which are carried out after a fetus has reached its second trimester of development, Durbin said an outright ban on the procedure could do more harm than good in cases where the health of the mother is in jeopardy. Fitzgerald described late-term abortions as brutal and said he supported an outright prohibition.

After listening to both senators' positions on the issues Dynia, 15, of Norwood Park, and Koscielniak, 16 of Portage Park, said they came away with a much better impression of Durbin.

"Durbin seems to be more for the people," said Dynia. "Fitzgerald, well, he bought his way into his position and he has his own points of view. It seems like he mostly wants to benefit himself."

On May 1 the students met with Rameet Kohli, a legislative aide for Schakowsky on education and environmental issues. The congresswoman had an appearance on CNN's Crossfire program that day.

Roszczwski, 16, of Jefferson Park, said they met with Kohli at Schakowsky's office. They discussed Taft's International Baccalaureate program, asked what they can do about problems they were having with the curriculum and asked him his views on standardized testing.

"He encouraged us," she said. "He said we can't get in trouble for voicing our opinions."

Kohli, when asked about standardized tests, said that they sometimes can provide skewed results because there are some students who excel at all of their subjects, but they do not do well on tests. The failings of even a few students can make a difference, he added.

In their meeting with the newspaper reporter, the students also had a chance to find out what it was like in Iraq during U.S. combat operations in March and April.

The reporter, who was embedded with the troops, said he came back with a souvenir, an Iraqi uniform seized from a residence during a raid. The reporter described life in the desert.

He went 48 days without a bath or shower and lost 20 pounds before returning to Washington.

None of the girls expressed an interest in seeking political office.

Bartusiak, 16, of Jefferson Park, said she came away with the feeling that it would be a difficult life.

"It seems that children who are thrust into political life are forced to grow up fast," she said. "And it seems like your life is just taken away from you." Bartusiak wants to be a teacher.

About their teacher/chaperon, the girls fondly referred to Carlson as "Santa Claus in a Hawaiian Shirt." Carlson, who has a full beard, said he wore Hawaiian shirts so he would easily stand out in a city where white shirts, blue suit jackets and red power ties are the norm.